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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the hybrid communication course and its tradition of teaching students a variety of important communication skills. The three-fold mission of the hybrid course in teaching interpersonal, group, and public speaking skills places the hybrid communication course in an important position at the dawn of the 21st century. Even though in the latest data reported the basic public speaking course remains the most popular basic course, the hybrid course offers an alternative approach to instruction in the basic course. While some basic courses emphasize public speaking, others focus on interpersonal communication, and yet others teach communication theory. Using requirements from regional accrediting agencies as a foundation enhances decisions concerning important communication skills in the basic course. The hybrid course has been presented as the appropriate course for undergraduate education for many years. This paper continues and, hopefully, contributes to this discussion. Since the basic communication course is usually the only course students take, communication faculty need to be prepared to make this course a significant contribution to the students' undergraduate studies and career aspirations. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/CR)

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THE HYBRID COURSE:

RESEARCH, PEDAGOGY AND TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the hybrid communication course and its tradition of teaching students a variety of important communication skills. The three-fold mission of the hybrid course in teaching interpersonal, group, and public speaking skills places the hybrid communication course in an important position at the dawn of the 21st century. Even though in the latest data reported the basic public speaking course remains the most popular basic course, the hybrid course offers an alternative approach to instruction in the basic course.

Using requirements from regional accrediting agencies as a foundation enhances the discussion of important communication skills in the basic course. The hybrid course has been presented as the appropriate course for undergraduate education for many years. This paper continues and, hopefully, contributes to this discussion. Since the basic communication course is usually the only course students take, communication faculty need to be prepared to make this course a significant contribution to the students' undergraduate studies and career aspirations.

Introduction

The basic communication course is central to any undergraduate program -- at least from our perspective as communication educators. The ability for students to learn competent communication skills to help them in diverse situations should be one of the central goals of every basic communication course. The difficulty arises from our inability to identify and agree upon specific communication skills for undergraduate students in the body of communication research and scholarship. This is clearly evidenced in basic course programs across the country when some programs emphasize public speaking, others emphasize the hybrid communication course, some focus on interpersonal communication, others teach communication theory, some basic course programs integrate both writing and speaking skills, while still others use their basic communication course program to teach rhetorical theory with little communication skill training.

The inability of communication educators to define these essential communication competencies contributes to an identity for the basic communication course. The necessity of identifying and then teaching appropriate communication competencies to students is the central role for faculty interested in beginning communication education. Shamefully, faculty frequently rely on their own views of what communication skills should be taught undergraduates, with little regard to existing results in the

literature. Although faculty views need to be incorporated into any basic course program, results of research exist, or can be completed, to guide the selection of specific skills needed by undergraduate students before graduation.

Logical questions from any faculty, administrator, or student on any campus is, "What skills should undergraduate students learn in the basic course?" *and* "How were these skills identified?" How these questions are answered has implications for basic courses, a student's education, faculty instructional strategies, and assessment of communication competence to meet accrediting agency demands. The next section of this paper presents the positions of our accrediting agencies on oral communication training.

Accrediting Agencies on Oral Communication Skills

All college and university accrediting agencies in the United States emphasize education in oral communication skills. The importance of teaching basic communication skills beyond or in addition to public speaking is reiterated by each regional college and university accrediting agencies (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Colleges and Schools, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). The skills

highlighted in their reports and guidelines include interpersonal (relational) communication skills, group decision making and leadership skills, listening skills, and presentational (public speaking skills). Each accrediting agency articulates a clear position regarding the importance of communication in a student's undergraduate education.

The *North Central Association of Colleges and Schools* (1994) suggested, "If a general education program is based on cognitive experiences, it will typically describe its programs in terms of the college-level experiences that engender such competencies as: capabilities in reading, writing, speaking, listening" (p. 21). The emphasis in speaking and listening by North Central provides clear guidance regarding the types of communication skills undergraduate students need. Simply stated, students need to

learn to speak competently and listen effectively in a variety of communication situations.

The *Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges* (1994) guidelines stated, "General education introduces students to the content and methodology of the major areas of knowledge -- the humanities, the fine arts, the natural sciences -- and helps them to develop the mental skills that will make them more effective learners. ... Programs of study ... must contain a recognizable body of instruction in program-related areas of 1) communication, 2) computation, and 3) human relationships" (p. 57). The Northwest Association's focus on communication skills and skills in human relations provide additional import to the inclusion of communication skills training in general education.

The other three accrediting agencies reiterate the emphasis on communication skill training in a student's undergraduate education. The *New England Association of Schools and Colleges* (1992) indicated that, "Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English" (p. 12). The *Southern Association of Colleges and Schools* (1992) concluded, "Within this core [of general education courses], or in addition to it, the institution must provide components designed to ensure competence in reading, writing, oral communication and fundamental mathematical skills" (p. 24). Finally, the *Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools* (1994) pointed out, "Programs and courses which develop general intellectual skills such as the ability to form

independent judgment, to weigh values, to understand fundamental theory, and to interact effectively in a culturally diverse world" (p. 4). This emphasis on communication skills is central to all college and university accrediting agencies in the United States. Our focus on how students may be trained in communication in pursuit of education is germane and timely.

The emphasis on oral communication skill development by each accrediting agency highlights an important problem facing basic course directors and communication educators of beginning communication programs. The problem or challenge is for communication faculty to develop programs in oral communication skills where students learn necessary skills and receive helpful assessment of these skills throughout their undergraduate educational careers.

Interestingly, the notion that beginning communication courses, those founded on the principles of teaching applicable communication skills, should be broad in nature and not too context specific in scope is not new. Over thirty years ago, Dedmon (1965) wrote, "Our traditional approaches have blinded us to the real objective of the required first [basic] course: To teach a general education course in oral communication" (p. 125).

The Hybrid Course:

The Tradition

The hybrid or blend basic communication course is a popular alternative to a straight public speaking course (Gibson, *et al.*, 1970; Gibson, *et al.*, 1974; Gibson, *et al.*, 1980; Gibson, *et al.*, 1985; Gibson, *et al.*, 1990). Many faculty, administrators, and basic course directors understand the inherent and added value of including different and multiple communication contexts in the beginning course in communication skill development. Pearson and West (1991) stated, "The hybrid course may vary from campus to campus. ... Nonetheless, the large number of popular texts which creatively combine several communication contexts suggest that the hybrid course is fairly homogenous" (p. 17). Others, too, understand and recognize the value of the hybrid course for basic communication skill development. Trank and Lewis (1991) concluded, "The blend or combination course is a popular option across all types of institutions and is reported as the most popular approach in the MA granting institutions" (p. 108).

Teaching communication skills in the interpersonal, group, interviewing, public speaking, and other communication contexts seems a good starting point for the student taking only one communication course. Focusing on just public speaking, group, or interpersonal communication skills leaves out other important communication contexts. Students need specific communication skill development in many contexts. There is no agreement on this

issue among teachers in or directors of basic communication courses about what skills or contexts that ought to be included in the basic communication course. There is little leadership from the National Communication Association guiding instruction in any specific direction regarding the mission of or content in the basic communication course. Seiler and McGukin (1989) concluded, "No agreement could be reached as to what the basic course is or what course best represents it!" (p. 29). These disagreements are evident at many basic course directors' conference when participants fail to agree on a set of specific communication skill competencies for students in any basic course.

It is not sufficient to suggest that the skills we teach in the introductory public speaking course, or for that matter any basic communication course, translate to other communication contexts. Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) agreed when they stated, "Obviously, students need the skills which have been identified by experienced faculty as those necessary to help them succeed in their academic course work. However, they also need communication skills which will carry over after graduation to ensure success in their chosen professions" (p. 187). Communication educators only minimally agree on what communication skill development programs ought to be part of the basic communication course. Suggesting that public speaking skills, even though the public speaking course remains the most

popular basic communication course, provide these needed skills is not an adequate conclusion.

In the public speaking course, how are we noting any skill transference beyond the classroom experience of the student to their career? As a result, a broader repertoire of skills for varying contexts seems an appropriate for the beginning or introductory course in communication skills. Seiler (1993) agreed, "Because of the diversified nature and the multi-plural society we are living in, the hybrid course has the flexibility and structure to adapt to change than any of the other introductory speech communication courses" (p. 56). Pearson and West (1991) concurred, "Since the introductory course serves as the sole exposure to the communication field, it is imperative that the course be as comprehensive as possible" (p. 29). They continue their argument for the hybrid communication course, "The hybrid course has a diversified portfolio and is more likely to survive in uncertain times than are the individually invested courses we teach" (p. 31). The strengths of the hybrid communication course are in the breadth of coverage of communication skills in the course, its comprehensive orientation to teaching multiple communication skills, and its potential to provide students with opportunities to learn, albeit at an introductory level, different skills for differing communication situations. A logical extension of this approach to the basic course is a program of oral communication across the curriculum (CAC). The hybrid course establishes a rich foundation for a CAC

program because it introduces students to multiple communication skills that can be reinforces, as appropriate by faculty in other programs on campus. For example, faculty in the health professions might select to develop students' interpersonal communication skills more in their course. Or faculty in business might decide students need additional competence in group communication skills.

With the hybrid course remaining the second most popular option for basic communication course programs around the country, those of us interested in the hybrid course are ready to increase program interest and student demand. Pearson and West (1991) reported, "A survey of college students and alumni found that, regardless of the nature of the introductory course experienced, both students and alumni believed the hybrid course to be most appropriate" (p. 28).

The Hybrid Communication Course: Background

The foundations for the hybrid communication course rely on the notion that students need to learn interpersonal communication skills, listening skills, group leadership and group participation skills in addition to public speaking skills. Seiler (1993) concluded, "In fact, surveys of alumni have consistently found that interpersonal communication, giving information and making decisions with another person, or

providing information to groups of individuals to be more important than strictly public skills" (p. 51).

Communication Skills: Student Needs

The necessity of identifying and then teaching appropriate communication competencies to students is the central role for faculty in the basic course. Faculty frequently rely on their own views of these communication skills. Although faculty views need to be incorporated into any basic course program, results of other research studies are available to guide us in our selection of specific skills needed by undergraduate students before their graduation.

For example, Curtis, Windsor and Stephens (1989) discovered a listing of abilities deemed desirable in new managers. Seiler (1993), in summarizing the results of this study, reported: "In a more recent study, 1000 personnel managers representing corporate, service, financial, government, insurance, retail and wholesale organizations were asked which skills are the most important in helping graduating college students obtain employment. The top three skills were oral communication, listening ability, and enthusiasm. The same personnel managers indicated that the abilities that young managers need include: 1. To work well with others, one-on-one, 2. To gather accurate information from others to make a decision, 3. To work well in small groups, 4. To listen effectively and give counsel, 5. To

give effective feedback (Curtis, Windsor, & Stephens, 1989) (p. 52).

The problem and all its tendrils was, and remains, that we have little if any research, beyond opinions of authors or course directors, to document whether students' communication skills develop as a result of their enrollment in the basic communication course. Seiler and McGukin (1989) stated clearly the exact problem, "Little research, however, has examined the effectiveness of instruction and practice in developing students' competence" (p. 31). Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) reiterated this problem when they wrote: "The faculty and the director of the basic course ought to be primarily concerned with the extent to which the basic course fulfills the communication needs of their students. However, this is typically not one of the more important concerns of basic course directors when they develop and/or evaluate the courses offered at their institutions. Departmental and program reviews seldom, if ever, look specifically at how well student needs are being met by particular courses. Instead, the major focus for many basic course directors in the developmental and/or evaluation of their courses is on concerns such as course objectives and content, instructional materials and methods, enrollment, staffing, and budget. It is true these concerns are extremely important to the faculty and students of the basic course. However, this concentration on the obvious has resulted in the unfortunate tendency to assume the students' communication needs are being

met by the basic course with little evidence to document our claims (p. 166).

The future of instructional practices in basic communication skills rests in the immediate and long-term responses to this specific challenge as we enter the 21st century.

Basic Course: Service to Students

Almost every source recognizes the importance of communication skill training for all undergraduate students. Regional university and college accrediting agencies note the importance of oral communication skill training. Business and engineering accrediting agencies note the importance of oral communication skill development training by requiring courses in oral communication skill training. One of the issues associated with this emphasis on oral communication skill is the exact content of such courses. Pearson and Nelson (1990) articulated this issue best when they stated, "Because so many people inside and outside the discipline tell the basic course what it should be, it has become rather resistant to change and in many ways anachronistic. Like so many university courses, it is designed to meet the need of yesterday, not today, and certainly not tomorrow" (pp. 4-5).

It is difficult to imagine a scenario where communication faculty let others dictate the content of the communication basic course. No one is in a better position that the "experts" in the field to determine the knowledge base and skill levels students

need in specific courses. It is time that communication educators take control of the basic communication course and, perhaps, their destiny. However, these decisions need to be based on research and data -- not personal opinions or points of view.

Gibson, *et al.* (1990), after surveying faculty and course directors about the basic communication course for the fifth time, concluded, "Most of the instructors believe the [basic] course needs some modification, and some of the major concerns are maintaining consistency across sections of the course, the size of the classes, the amount of time available for assignments, and support budget for the course" (p. 255). Some modification in the orientation and philosophical underpinnings of the basic course is needed. The movement towards the hybrid communication course is warranted by information from accrediting agencies and research reported in our journals. This movement needs to continue to grow to better prepare students for their careers.

The first step in this growing interest in the hybrid course is identifying what skills **are** important for students to learn. If communication educators could, with some degree of certainty, identify these skills, consistency would be easier to attain. It is difficult to suggest we know what we are doing when on one campus the basic course is public speaking, on another campus it is interpersonal communication, on another campus it is the hybrid course, while on another campus it is a course in the rhetorical tradition. Research suggests that the coverage of

competencies in the hybrid communication course is the area of consistency communication educators could adopt as a central anchor for instruction.

Issues for the Hybrid Course

There are two issues related to pedagogy in the hybrid communication course. Since research suggests that the hybrid communication course is most appropriate in a student's undergraduate education, the remaining two issues include:

1) the integration of technologies
2) assessment

Technologies in the Basic Course

Perhaps nothing has the potential to impact pedagogy in the hybrid course more than the continuing evolution of new technologies. Communication educators appear resistant to change. No greater or faster change in education exists than the use of technologies on instruction in the hybrid communication course. Pearson and Nelson (1990) offered a warning to basic course directors and educators, "Jamieson (1990) warned that the communication field could become extinct if we do not respond to current technological changes. ... The basic course needs to address new communication patterns and relationships" (pp. 13-14).

These technological influences will occur in many forms in students' lives. First, interpersonal relationships are forming through communication on the Internet. Students are interacting with people across town, across the country, and around the world. The hybrid communication course is the appropriate place to teach mediated interpersonal relationship skills.

Second, students conduct research for any assignment by sitting at their desk and calling for the information on the computer. What are communication instructors teaching students about these electronic sources of information? Even if instructors use their classical approaches to research and data collection, what are they teaching students about the credibility of information collected off the Internet? Communication instructors need to be prepared to instruct their students because of the influx of data from the Internet for student use.

Third, the creation of distance learning programs to teach beginning communication skills offers additional challenges. Students can learn course content in their home, apartment, or dorm room. Skill development is incorporated into several of these distance learning programs. Perhaps distant learning of communication skills is a response to the challenge offered by Pearson and Nelson (1990), "If we [basic course instructors] are to maintain currency, we must venture into new areas or treat classic areas in new ways" (p. 14).

Assessment

Each institution has been or is facing the issue of assessment as prescribed by its accrediting agency. A specific area of institutional assessment discussed by each accrediting agency is in the area of oral communication competencies. Prior to developing and testing such techniques, specific competencies need to be identified that can be taught in the basic communication course.

The overall instructional delivery system in the hybrid communication course must be assessed. With clear and defensible goals and objectives for the hybrid course, instructors' teaching strategies and techniques can also be assessed. This is a valuable consideration in the selection and retention of instructors in the basic communication course. With specific instructor assessment data, perhaps the emphasis on instruction in the basic communication course will change. Maybe communication departments will use the best instructors in the department to teach basic communication courses. Perhaps communication researchers will give attention to instruction in the basic communication course.

Discussion

Research results are clear, directives from accrediting agencies are clear, opinions of business leaders are clear; and

they conclude one thing: ***the hybrid communication course is the best basic communication course for undergraduate students***. This conclusion is consistent with the tradition and instructional practices in the hybrid course. Helping students learn interpersonal, listening, group **and** public speaking skills is the clear directive. To settle for anything less seems inconsistent with the facts.

If we continue to ignore the research reported in our journals, in management journals, compiled by accrediting agencies and the U.S. government (United States Department of Education, 1994; 1995); then what will be our future. We need to capitalize on the tradition of the hybrid course and offer students instruction in the communication competencies they need.

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